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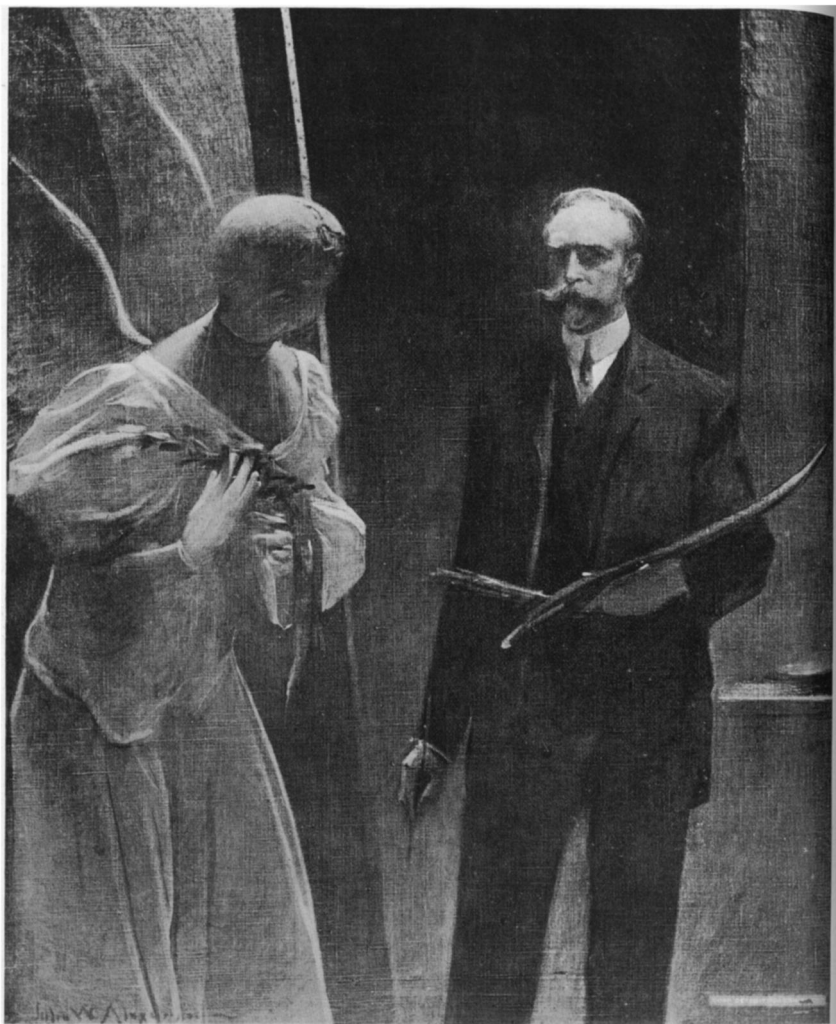
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THE TENTH MUSE

JOHN W. ALEXANDER

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A PORTRAIT OF JOHN W. ALEXANDER

JOHN WHITE ALEXANDER*

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

JOHN WHITE ALEXANDER was born in Allegheny, Pa., October 7, 1856. During his early boyhood he lived with his grandparents, his father and mother having died when he was very young. When he was twelve years old he left school and took a position as messenger in the Pittsburgh office of the Atlantic and Pacific Telegraph Company. Col. Edward Jay Allen, the secretary and treasurer of the company, became interested in the boy, and upon the death of his grandfather, was appointed his guardian and took him into his own home. Perhaps the most important incident of these early years was the trip which he made in a skiff down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, with Robert Burns Wilson.

Alexander lived with Colonel Allen until he was about eighteen, when he went to New York, with the purpose of studying art. There he secured employment with Harper & Brothers, although it was some time before he was given a place in the illustrating department. Charles Parsons was then at the head of this department, and during those years Mr. Parsons gave Alexander valuable help and encouragement. At that time illustrations for the magazines were made by working directly upon the wooden block, several men frequently working upon the same block; and this was the work assigned to Alexander when he was transferred to the illustrating department. He usually put in the figures, but such composite illustrations were often unsigned. We do not, in turning to the old files of Harper's, find much that throws light upon this period of Alexander's work, although there appear occasional cartoons, signed "Alexander," from about September 18, 1875, until the middle of 1877, which are very interesting and amusing. In *Harper's Weekly* of September 18, 1875, is a cartoon "Rags! More Rags! the campaign cry of the Ohio Democracy." Another political cartoon appears on July 29, 1876, and again on February 24, 1877, we find

another. In midsummer, 1877, what is known as the "Great Strike" occurred in Pittsburgh, a tragic event in the history of the Pennsylvania Railroad. Alexander was in Pittsburgh at that time and a number of large full, or half-page sketches of the riots and conflagrations, signed "J. W. Alexander," appeared in *Harper's Weekly*, on August 11, 1877. "The great strike. The work of destruction in Pittsburgh," "Pittsburgh in the hands of the mob. Burning and sacking freight trains, P. R. R.," "Burning of offices and machine shops, P. R. R.," "Burning of the round-house at Pittsburgh," "Panoramic view of the ruins of the burned district"; these titles tell the story, and the sketches are a graphic record of the fearful destruction which occurred. Later on Alexander had frequent signed illustrations in Harper's publications, and also in the *Century*, but this was after he had gone abroad, and not during those first apprentice years.

Thomas Nast, E. A. Abbey, Stanley Reinhart and A. B. Frost were all working for Harper's when Alexander first went there, and we know that Alexander was in close touch with these men, and that in many cases the friendships which were formed in the old Harper's establishment, lasted throughout his life.

Alexander remained for about three years with Harper & Brothers, and until he had saved \$300. Then, late in the summer of 1877, he and his friend, Albert G. Reinhart, sailed from Philadelphia for Liverpool. After a short time spent in London, they went to Paris, where they were disappointed to find the "Ecole des Beaux Arts," which they expected to enter, closed for repairs. Reinhart suggested that, as he knew a few words of German—neither of them knew a word of French—they should go to Munich.

In Munich Alexander studied for about three months, in the class of Professor Benzur at the Munich Academy of Fine Arts. But the expense of living in the city

*A biographical sketch written for the catalogue of the John W. Alexander Memorial Exhibition in the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, and reprinted herewith by special permission.



MRS. J. W. ALEXANDER

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was comparatively high, and Alexander was not in sympathy with the severe and academic method of the school, so he presently decided to go to Pölling in Northern Bavaria, where there was at that time a small colony of American artists, among others J. Frank Currier, Walter L. Shirlaw, Joseph De Camp and Ross Turner.

There Alexander first started to paint. From Pölling he sent, at the suggestion of Professor Benzsur, some of his drawings to the Students' Exhibition at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, and he was awarded a bronze medal, his first honor. The time spent in Munich and Pölling was just about two years, embracing 1878 and 1879.

After leaving Pölling, Alexander joined a class of art students, which Frank Duveneck had arranged to take to Florence. Duveneck and Alexander went ahead to find studios, and in the course of a month the others, numbering twenty-three in all, joined them in Florence, where they spent two winters. The summers they spent in Venice, and it was in Venice that Alexander first met James McNeil Whistler, who was then making the series of Venetian etchings which have since become so famous. Alexander was working one day, with his easel up, in an out-of-the-way corner of Venice, when a stranger came and looked over his shoulder and made some criticism of his work. It proved to be Whistler, and the acquaintance which developed into a warm and lifelong friendship dated from that day.

During these years abroad Alexander made his living by sending drawings back to Harper's. Later, in Florence, he started an art class, which proved very successful. In fact, so much of his time and strength became absorbed in the task of teaching that he realized that his own work and development were likely to be hampered. This really determined him to return to America.

Upon his return he had no money and he found little or no opportunity in Pittsburgh, where he went first, to carry on his work. Harper's gave him illustrating to do and early in the spring of 1881, he and Fred Muller made a voyage down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers in the towboat of a large coal fleet. The voyage is described by Mr. Muller in an article called "King Coal's Highway," which appeared in *Harper's Monthly* in January, 1882, and for which Mr. Alexander made a series of illustrations.

Alexander soon returned to New York, where he took a studio in the German Bank Building, on the corner of Fourth avenue and Fourteenth street. There Mr. Henry Harper, of Harper & Brothers, gave him his first commission to paint a portrait of his little daughter. He stayed in the German Bank Building studio until he moved into a studio in the Chelsea Building, 222 West Twenty-third street, which he occupied until 1890.

During this period when he was living in America, after his return from Florence,

Alexander spent two summers abroad. The first summer, in 1884, he went to Spain and Morocco; the second summer, that of 1886, he went for The Century Company to do work for the magazine. That was the summer when he did a series of portraits, among others those of Thomas Hardy, Alphonse Daudet, Austin Dobson, George Bancroft and Robert Louis Stevenson. Stevenson was living at Skerryvore, Bournemouth, in the south of England, and Alexander stayed with him there, having had an introduction to him from Edmund Gosse. On July 11, 1886, Stevenson writes to his family about the portrait, which was published in *The Century* for April, 1888; and later in a letter written to Henry James, Stevenson again refers to Alexander, this time to "the dear Alexander," whom he says he has just seen. The portrait of George Bancroft appeared in *The Century* for January, 1887, and the Hardy portrait in July, 1893. Alexander also spent a month or six weeks in Ireland that year, doing a number of illustrations, interesting landscape sketches, for a series of articles about Ireland, by Charles de Kay, which appeared in *The Century* during 1889 and 1890.

A year after Alexander came home from this second summer spent abroad, in 1887, he married Elizabeth Alexander. Mr. and Mrs. Alexander lived in New York for three years after their marriage. Then, early in 1890, they went abroad, because Mr. Alexander had had a serious attack of grippe, which left him in a much weakened condition. They expected to stay two years and stayed eleven; years rich in happy associations and friendships, and especially notable because of the distinguished honors and professional recognition which came to the young painter. The Alexanders lived in Paris, first at 31 Boulevard Berthier, and later at 190 Boulevard Malesherbes, and they were in touch with French life and French art in a peculiarly intimate sense. Few Americans have more happily taken their place in the social and artistic life of a foreign city.

Alexander received marked recognition for the first time in the spring of 1893, at the exhibition of the *Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, to which he had sent three portraits. These appeared under the



APOTHEOSIS OF PITTSBURGH

JOHN W. ALEXANDER

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ONE OF A SERIES OF PANELS IN

THE CARNEGIE INSTITUTE, PITTSBURGH

titles of "*Portrait Gris*," "*Portrait Noir*" and "*Portrait Jaune*." This group was the feature of the Salon, the paintings were marked number 1, were hung together in a panel and the young painter was immediately afterward elected associate of the society. This success was followed by the exhibition at the Grafton Gallery in London of two portraits which were given a place of honor. The next year, in the spring of 1894, he exhibited a group of five portraits and two compositions at the exhibition of the *Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts*; and in June of that year he was elected to full membership in that society, being made a *Sociétaire*, with the privilege of exhibiting *hors concours*, of voting with the society and of serving on its juries.

This distinguished honor by the French society placed Mr. Alexander at once in the front rank of the younger painters. His ability was recognized and his success as a painter was assured. Recognition in other cities followed closely upon the Paris success. He was invited to contribute to the exhibitions of Europe and of the United States. Medals and awards came to him from most distinguished sources, and, today, scarcely a permanent collection, national or civic, but contains an example of his work. The Luxembourg in Paris; museums in St. Petersburg, Odessa and Vienna; in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Washington, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Minneapolis and Providence; Stevens Institute of Technology; Princeton, Yale, Harvard and Columbia Universities; the list shows a wide representation.

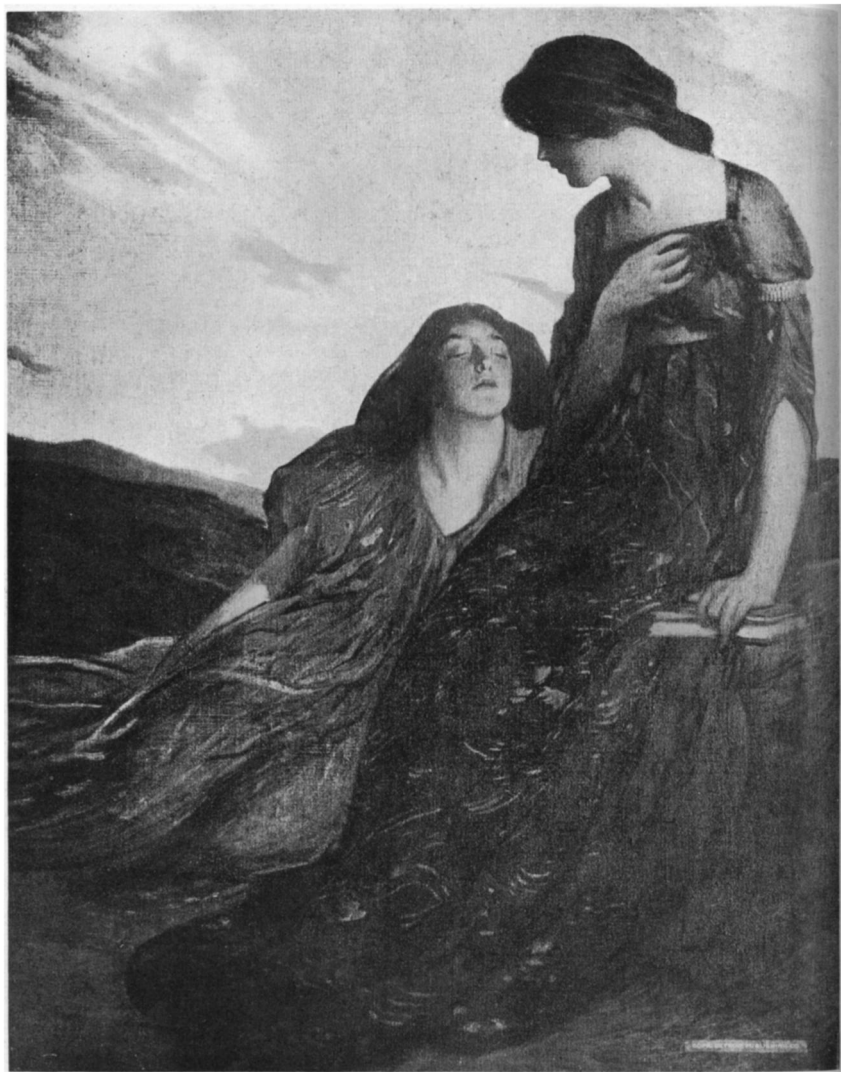
Mr. Alexander took an active interest in the work of various art organizations, and at the time of his death he was associated as officer or member with twenty such art organizations, an unusual record. He was President of the National Academy of Design, the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the MacDowell Club, the National Academy Association, and the School Art League of New York; he was Vice-President of the Society of Mural Painters; he was a director of the American Federation of Arts, Washington, D. C.; he was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the American Fine Arts

Society, the Fine Arts Federation of New York, the Architectural League of New York, the National Association of Portrait Painters, the American Academy in Rome, the Paris Society of American Painters, and of the Royal Society of Fine Arts, Brussels. He was a charter member of the International Society of Sculptors, Painters and Gravers, London; and an honorary member of the Secession Society, Munich; Secession Society, Vienna; Royal Society of British Artists, London; American Institute of Architects, and of the Society of Illustrators, New York.

The list of his medals and awards of honor is further evidence of the recognition which has been accorded to Mr. Alexander as a painter of unusual ability and distinction. In 1897 the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, awarded him the Temple Gold Medal, and in 1904 he was awarded by the same institution, the Gold Medal of Honor. In 1911 he received the Medal of the First Class at the International Exhibition at Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh. At the Exposition Universelle, Paris, in 1900, at the Pan-American Exposition at Buffalo, in 1901, at the Universal Exposition, St. Louis, in 1904, and at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition at San Francisco, in 1915, he received gold medals of honor. In 1899 he was awarded the Lippincott Prize by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; in 1901, the Carnegie Prize by the Society of American Artists, New York; and in 1903, the Corcoran Prize by the Society of Washington Artists, Washington, D. C. His first medal was awarded to him at the Students' Exhibition at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Munich, about 1879. Princeton University conferred upon him the honorary degree of Master of Arts in 1892, and the honorary degree of Doctor of Literature in 1909. In 1901 he was made a Knight of the Legion of Honor by the French Government.

In the Library of Congress, Washington, D. C., are six lunettes, "The Evolution of the Book," and in the Carnegie Institute are forty-eight panels, the "Crowning of Labor," which represent his achievement in the field of mural decoration.

In 1901 Mr. and Mrs. Alexander, with



MEMORIES

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their son James, came to America, and from that time until his death, on the 31st of May, 1915, Mr. Alexander lived in New York at 116 East Sixty-fifth street. During those years he gave freely of his time and

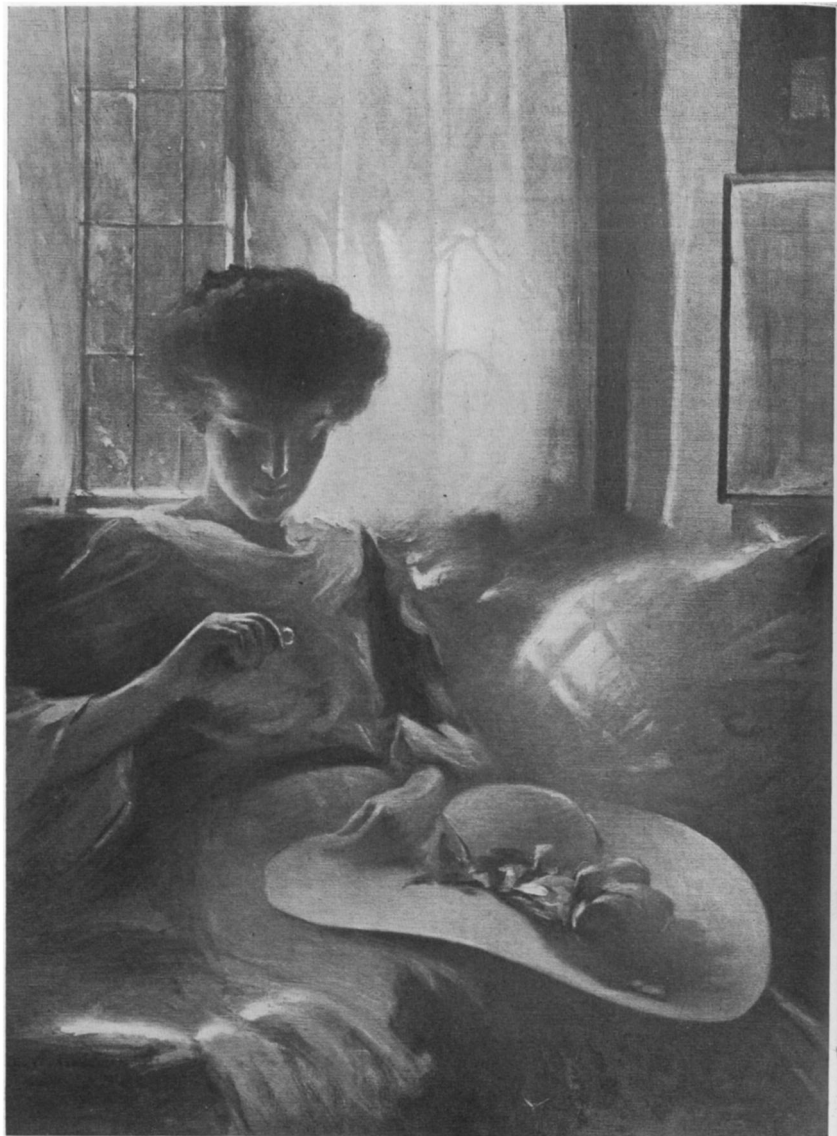
strength to further the interests of art in America. It would be impossible to estimate the amount of vital energy and of real service which he gave to various art organizations and projects—H. M. B.



JUNE

JOHN W. ALEXANDER

THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
WASHINGTON, D. C.



THE RING

JOHN W. ALEXANDER

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART